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ABSTRACT

The Navajo Teacher Education Initiative was developed in 1992 to improve the quality of Navajo education through the recruitment and training of prospective Navajo educators. Currently, the 242 schools on or near the Navajo Nation are staffed primarily by non-Navajo teachers who often do not understand the significance of Navajo culture, history, language, and values. The Navajo Nation is the largest reservation in the United States and is located in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Members of the initiative include Navajo Community College, the University of New Mexico, Northern Arizona University, Prescott College, Fort Lewis College, the University of Northern Colorado, and the Navajo Nation Division of Education. Objectives of the initiative include planning and implementing an integrated field-based teacher education program through a consortium of colleges and universities; integrating Navajo philosophy, language, and culture into required teacher education courses; developing a monitoring system for assessment of pilot projects; implementing a computerized Navajo teacher education tracking system; expanding curriculum developed by Navajo Community College and based on the Dine' Philosophy of Learning to other consortium members; disseminating best teaching practices through publications and presentations; and influencing legislative and policy development agendas regarding alternative teacher education efforts and funding policies. In November 1995, the Ford Foundation (sponsor of the consortium) and the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education cosponsored a Navajo Nation Education Policy Forum that attracted 200 representatives of state education agencies, universities, state legislatures, local education agencies, and community and business interests. As a result of the forum, priority policy areas were identified. (LP)

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NAVAJO NATION TEACHER EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The Navajo Nation Teacher Education Consortium was initiated in 1992 through the sponsorship and funding provided by the Ford Foundation based in New York City, New York. The institutional members of the Consortium include: Navajo Community College; the University of New Mexico-Gallup branch; Northern Arizona University; Prescott College; Fort Lewis College; the University of Northern Colorado; and, the Navajo Nation Division of Education. The guiding principle behind the Consortium was a commitment to improving the quality of Navajo education through the preparation of additional Navajo educators. The effort directed at preparing additional Navajo educators was based on two premises: 1) education is best when in the hands of the people being educated; and, 2) education must be based on the philosophy and values of those being educated. The major features of the Consortium include recruitment of prospective Navajo educators, on-site rural delivery of teacher education courses, Navajo language courses, ongoing advisement, financial aid and stipends, and value added support services to retain and graduate Navajo teacher education candidates.

The Navajo Nation comprises the largest Indian Nation in the United States with a population in excess of 200,000 people in 1992. The Navajo Nation has a land base that is approximately the size of the state of West Virginia (25,000 square miles) located in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. According to the 1990 census, over fifty percent of all Navajo citizens are twenty years of age or younger.

The Navajo Nation has a great need to have more qualified Navajo teachers in schools serving Navajo and other Native American students. Currently, the 242 schools (K-12) on or near the Navajo Nation are staffed primarily by non-Navajo teachers (Izzo, 1995). Over 6,000 teachers and administrators comprise the teaching force within Navajo schools with

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the responsibility to educate over 70,000 Navajo children and youth. Less than twenty percent of the total number of teachers on the Navajo Nation are Navajo, though virtually all of the 1,000 para-professional educators in the schools are Navajo. Teachers employed by the Navajo Nation schools typically come from locations outside the Nation, and are often inadequately prepared to work with children from a culture that is different from their own.

Although a majority of Navajo schools are governed by Navajo majority Boards of Education, the Navajo Nation continues to employ a small minority of Navajo teachers. This means that most Navajo children and youth are taught by non-Navajo teachers who often do not relate to or understand the significance of Navajo culture, history, language, and values. This would be analogous to the United States' educational system being under the control of a foreign country.

The Navajo people have relied upon their language, culture and beliefs to sustain them through a variety of adversities and continuous contact with other cultures. These contacts have been based on a goal of assimilation and acculturation, frequently to the exclusion of anything Navajo. The culture and tradition of a people are transmitted by their language. The traditions of a people is assured when status, respect, and viability is accorded that language and culture. The Navajo language is alive and is still used in all communities across the Navajo Nation. To be most effective, the teachers of Navajo children must appreciate and understand the language, culture, and philosophy of the children they teach. Through a collaborative partnership among the Navajo Nation, nearby institutions of higher education, state education agencies, and federal education agencies, Navajo education has become stronger and richer as the various educational systems accord equal status and respect to the Navajo language and culture as placed on English and Western culture (Rude & Pfeiffer, 1994).

As a collaborative collection of post-secondary institutions, the Navajo Nation Teacher Education Initiative has focused on increasing the supply and quality of Navajo educators. This far reaching goal has been supported through the following objectives: a) planning and implementation of an integrated field based teacher education program through a coordinated consortium of colleges and universities; b) infusion of Navajo philosophy, language, and culture courses as requisites toward completion of the

teacher education programs; c) development of monitoring systems for valued added assessment of all respective pilot projects; d) development and implementation of a computerized Navajo teacher education tracking system; e) expansion of the Dine' Philosophy of Learning through the expansion of curriculum developed by Navajo Community College to other Consortium members; f) dissemination of best practices through publications, presentations, and other fora; and, g) influence on legislative and policy development agenda within the participating states impacted by the Navajo Nation Teacher Education Consortium regarding alternative teacher certification efforts and changes in funding policies.

As the incentives provided through the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation to support the collaborative partnership have phased out, the participating institutions within the Navajo Nation Teacher Education Consortium have resolved to institutionalize their involvement. One of the major commitments on the part of the Consortium members has been to develop stronger linkages with professional organizations that are congruent with the vision of Navajo education. In November of 1995, the Ford Foundation and the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education co-sponsored a Navajo Nation Education Policy Forum which attracted 200 participants. Those in attendance represented state education agencies, universities, state legislatures, local education agencies, community and business interests. Strategic action plans were developed within four priority policy areas which included: a) sovereignty of the Navajo Nation; b) support for the Dine' Educational Philosophy of Learning; c) recruitment and retention of educators; and, d) delivery of programs and services to Navajo people residing in rural and remote areas (Hopkins & Rude, 1996).

Sovereignty refers to the Navajo Nation's responsibility within the era of self-determination to create effective teacher education policies. The major direction of this priority include the following recommendations:

- require federal and state educational entities to develop, implement and maintain equal learning opportunities in Navajo and English throughout the curriculum.
- require formal knowledge of Navajo history, culture, language and government by all educators on the Navajo Nation.
- provide resources and support for the development and implementation of a bachelor's degree program in elementary teacher education at Navajo Community College.

Dine' Educational Philosophy of Learning refers to the process of education which takes the child from the known to the unknown through culturally relevant teaching and learning. Key features in support of this philosophy include the following:

•providing instruction that results in bilingual/bicultural proficiency in Navajo and English.

•revising Navajo education standards to reflect the Dine' Educational Philosophy of Learning as a basis for teaching and learning.

Recruitment and retention is necessary to address existing barriers that exist in identifying and supporting prospective Navajo educators. Key policy considerations include:

•providing resources and support for recruiting talented Navajo students to enter the teaching profession.

•providing resources and support to enable Navajo teacher candidates to complete degree programs in education.

Program design to rural areas is an imperative consideration to address the vast geography and low population density of the Navajo Nation. Some policy issues that emerge include:

•developing technological innovations to support greater access to higher education for the Navajo people.

•expanding collaborative networks among colleges and universities to deliver quality instructional experiences to post-secondary students across the Navajo Nation.

The motivation of the Navajo Nation Teacher Education Consortium to sustain the highly successful outcomes of its short legacy have created support for expansion of the network of potential institutions interested in joining the Consortium. The singular most powerful motivation for joining the Consortium has been the commitment to building the capacity of Navajo education by supporting the vision of the Navajo Nation government through its Division of Education and the Navajo Community College. As the Consortium continues to implement the vision of Navajo education, it invites the participation of other interested institutional members. The vision for Navajo education has been captured through the strategic thinking and planning efforts of Navajo educators. An English translation of the vision reads as follows:

As children of the Holy People we learn to respect and hold sacred our culture, our lifeways and our kinship. In our maturity we will be self-sufficient and healthy. We will be proficient in the Navajo and English languages, be aware of ourselves, be generous, respect and practice kinship. We will not be cornered because we practice good thinking, efficient planning, healthy living and because we seek a strong harmonious future. We will journey through life with wisdom while maintaining our sovereignty and the Treaty of 1868. People will recognize our self-sufficiency and the education of our children will be our concern and our responsibility.

References

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